

# Jerusalem Perspective

A Monthly Report on Research into the Words of Jesus

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## Jesus and the Oral Torah

### The Unutterable Name of God

*In our last issue, we began to illustrate Jesus' observance of the biblical commandments as they were interpreted by the sages of his time. Blessing God for food after eating is a biblical commandment. But, as we noted, Jesus also said a blessing before eating. Blessing before the meal is a commandment of the Oral Torah, or more precisely, a rabbinic interpretation of a commandment in the Written Torah. Another example of Jesus' observance of the Oral Torah is his adherence to the rabbinic prohibition against using the Unutterable Name of God.*

**T**he original understanding of the third commandment, "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain" (Exodus 20:7), was that one must keep one's vow when swearing by God's name. The rabbis eventually came to interpret this commandment to mean using the Lord's name lightly or frivolously. To avoid the risk of employing the Divine Name irreverently, the rabbis ruled that one should not utter it at all.

The tetragrammaton, יהוה (YHVH), could be pronounced only in the Temple (Sifre Numbers 39), in the daily priestly blessing (Sotah 7:6), and in the confession of the High Priest on the Day of Atonement (Yoma 6:2). When reading or reciting Scripture, one was not to pronounce the Unutterable Name, but rather had to substitute אדני ('a-do·NAI, Lord).

This avoidance of the tetragrammaton began very early. Although there was no hesitation about pronouncing the Sacred

Name in daily life during the First Temple period, already by the third century B.C. 'a-do·NAI was being substituted for YHVH.

### Further Substitutes

In time, the substitute 'a-do·NAI itself came to have such a sacred aura that it was used only in Scripture reading and prayer.

When it was necessary to refer to God in everyday speech, other substitutes were sought: המקום (ha·ma·KOM, the Place), הקדוש (ha·ka·DOSH, the Holy), הגבוה (ha·ga·VO·ah, the High), הלשון (ha·la·SHON, the Tongue), הגבורה (ha·gu·RAH, the Power), השם (ha·SHEM, the Name), שמים (sha·MAI·yim, Heaven), and others. Even אלהים ('e·lo·HIM, God), which could refer

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## The Syndicated Donkey

**A**s Jesus approached Jerusalem for the last time, he and his large band of Galilean disciples climbed the steep eastern slopes of the Mount of Olives. Near Bethany (בית ענתי) he sent two of his disciples to a nearby village, presumably Bethphage (בית פזי), with instructions to bring him a previously unridden donkey colt which they would find tethered at the entrance of the village.

His disciples did as they were asked, but as they were untying the donkey, according to Luke 19:33 its "owners" —not "owner" said, "Why are you untying the colt?"

### Without Precedent

All English translations of the New Testament, with the exception of the Jerusalem Bible, give "owners" at this point in the text. But why would this young donkey have had more than one owner, a thing that was unusual in ancient Jewish society? Was this a special donkey, so valuable that it had to be syndicated as many race horses are today, or owned in partnership as a business investment?

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## Syndicated Donkey

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Commentators generally have understood the plural "owners" to mean "the owner and those with him" (ICC), or "its master and mistress, expressed merely as the plural" (*Anchor Bible*). However, there is no ancient precedent for this understanding. There are examples of two or more animals being owned by one man, but no substantial evidence of one animal being owned by several men.

## Possible Solution

Perhaps Wycliffe Bible translator and Jerusalem School scholar Dr. Randall Buth has provided a solution to this puzzle. He has pointed out in his article, "Luke 19:31-34, Mishnaic Hebrew and Bible Translation: Is κύριοι τοῦ πώλου Singular?" (*Journal of Biblical Literature*, 104 (1985), 680-685), that in Hebrew בעלים (*be-ʿal-LIM*), the plural of בעל (*BA-ʿal*; "master, lord; owner"), often is used in a singular sense.

The classic example of this usage is found in Exodus 21:29 in connection with the laws pertaining to a goring ox:

If, however, that ox has been in the habit of goring and its owner [literally "owners"], though warned has not kept it penned up [singular form of the verb] and it kills a man or woman, the ox must be stoned

and its owner [literally "owners"] also must be put to death [singular form of the verb].

Twice in this passage, the plural noun בעלים ("owners") appears with a singular verb, indicating that the noun is in fact used in a singular sense.

## Singular Idiom

The same idiomatic use of this plural noun in a singular sense is found in Mishnaic Hebrew, except that the accompanying verb is usually in the plural. Ancient Greek and Aramaic translations of Scripture such as the Septuagint and the Targums render the idiomatic plural noun, "owners," as "owner." This suggests that the idiom was foreign to Greek and Aramaic.

In fact, this idiom does not exist in Greek or Aramaic. It is unattested in Greek literature, and Jerusalem scholar and Aramaic specialist, Prof. Michael Sokoloff, has confirmed that this idiom also does not exist in any early Palestinian Aramaic text.

## More Accurate

Dr. Buth may have discovered a significant key which can aid in revealing the original language of the Gospel story. Because Hebrew and Aramaic are so similar in their idioms, it is seldom that one can find in the texts of the Gospels a Hebrew idiom that is not also an Aramaic idiom. This idiom, however, seems to be unique to Hebrew. It is all the more significant because it is found neither in the Septuagint nor in Greek literature in general.

As Dr. Buth has suggested in his article, if we assume a Hebraism behind this rather surprising plural, then the story reads more naturally. The owner, not owners, asked the two disciples, "Why are you untying the colt?"

This Hebrew idiom, sheltered in the Greek of Luke's Gospel, is another example that shows how translating the Gospel texts into Hebrew makes it possible to achieve a more accurate English translation.

## Unutterable Name

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to the God of Israel or to false gods, was avoided in conversation.

So serious was the prohibition against pronouncing the tetragrammaton, that the rabbis included among those who have no share in the World to Come "he who pronounces the Divine Name as it is spelled" (Sanhedrin 10:1).

## Divine Euphemisms

Jesus often used euphemisms for God — his audiences would have been shocked had he not. The most common word for God used by Jesus was "Heaven." This occurs often throughout the Gospel of Matthew in the phrase "Kingdom of Heaven," the term Jesus used for his community of disciples.

Mark and Luke used "Kingdom of God," possibly because most of their Greek readers might not have understood the euphemism. The original, however, is מלכות שמים (*mal-KUT sha-MAL-yim*, Kingdom of Heaven), which is common in the Hebrew literature of the period while "Kingdom of God" is never used.

Matthew 21:25 quotes Jesus asking those in the Temple who questioned his authority, "Was the baptism of John from Heaven [i.e., from God] or from men?" Similarly, in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:21), Jesus had the prodigal say to his father, "I have sinned against Heaven."

One other euphemism for God's name used by Jesus was *hag-vu-RAH*, the Power. When interrogated by the high priests, Jesus was asked to admit that he was the Messiah. His answer, recorded in Matthew 26:63, is a classic example of rabbinic sophistication: "From now on the 'Son of Man' will be sitting on the right of the Power," which hints at two messianic passages from Scripture, Daniel 7:13 and Psalm 110:1.

*Our series on Jesus and the Oral Torah continues in the next issue.*

## Jerusalem Perspective

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**A**ramaic and Hebrew are sister languages, both Semitic languages that existed in close proximity in the time of Jesus in the lands at the eastern end of the Mediterranean. Aramaic was as similar to Hebrew as Swedish is to Norwegian or Portuguese is to Spanish.

The two languages share much of their vocabulary, and despite the fact that idioms are usually unique to a particular language, Hebrew has many idioms in common with Aramaic. Aramaic speakers freely borrowed vocabulary from Hebrew, and Hebrew speakers likewise freely borrowed many words from Aramaic. *Abba*, for instance, is an Aramaic word, but it is also a genuine Hebrew word, used frequently by native Hebrew speakers of Jesus' day.

### Side by Side

The similarity between Hebrew and Aramaic is the main reason that scholars continue to argue about whether the sayings of Jesus recorded in the Greek Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke reflect a Hebrew or an Aramaic original.

Today Hebrew and Arabic exist side by side just as Hebrew and Aramaic existed side by side in the Land of Israel in the time of Jesus. The fact that *Abba* was used by first-century Israelites no more proves that their native language was Aramaic than the use of *bas* ("enough"), *hu-mus* ("humus"), *ya-la* ("Get going") or *kef* ("fun") by modern Israelis would prove they speak Arabic, or the use of "okay," "boss," "bye-bye," "hi," or "fifty-fifty" would prove that they speak English.

### Forms of "Father"

The word for "father" in both Hebrew and Aramaic is *ʔav*. "My

# Hebrew Nuggets

father" also is the same in both languages: *ʔav*. However, each language has its own way of making nouns definite. Hebrew does it by prefixing the syllable *ha* to the noun—thus *ha-ʔav* is "the father."

## Lesson Five: *Abba*

*Abba is an Aramaic word meaning "the father." This word was borrowed by Hebrew speakers and used in the sense of "Daddy." Today the word Abba lives again on the streets and in the homes of Israel. Children say, "Abba come here!" "Abba do this!" "Abba do that!" No son, even after he is grown, calls to his father by the Hebrew word for father, but by this Aramaic loan-word.*

Aramaic, however, attaches a suffix (-aʔ) to the noun. "The father" in Aramaic is *ʔa-BAʔ*.

In biblical Hebrew, *ʔav* meant not only "my father," but also was used idiomatically in the sense "Daddy" (Jeremiah 3:19; II Kings 2:12, 13:14). However, by the time of Jesus, Hebrew had borrowed *Abba* from Aramaic to express this special term of endearment.

In early rabbinic literature, *Abba* almost totally replaced *ʔav* ("my father") in the sense of "Daddy." In Jeremiah 3:19 God sadly says to his people, "I had resolved to treat you like sons...I thought you would surely call me *ʔav* ["my father"; "Daddy"] and never again stop following me." However, in post-biblical Hebrew literature, one expressed "Daddy" with the the Aramaic loan-word, *ʔa-BAʔ*, rather than with *ʔav*.

## Barabbas

*Abba* also is a proper name. Barabbas, a revolutionary of the time of Jesus mentioned in the Gospels (Mark 15:7), is none other than *bar ʔa-BAʔ*, son [of] *Abba*. He was the son of a man named *Abba*.

Remember, as we learned in Lesson Four, Greek masculine names ordinarily end with a consonant, usually with the *sigma*, the "s" sound. Remove this Greek ending from "Barabbas" and you have the Aramaic or Hebrew "Barabba."

Both *bar* and *abba* are good Hebrew words as well as Aramaic words. Both have been found in ossuary inscriptions and on ostraca (inscribed potsherds) dating from the first century. More about *bar* in a future lesson.

## *Abba* in the New Testament

The Greek transcription of *ʔa-BAʔ* (*abba*)—appears three times in the New Testament, in Mark 14:36, Romans 8:15 and Galatians 4:6. According to Mark 14:36, Jesus addressed God as "Abba" in the Garden of Gethsemane when he asked God to remove the cup of suffering that he was about to drink.

It is possible that Jesus also used "Abba" rather than "father" when he turned to God in praise for the simple ones to whom God had given wisdom. In the midst of his agonies on the cross Jesus may have cried "Abba" twice: "Abba, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34), and "Abba, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46).

*In Lesson Six we will begin learning the consonant and vowel symbols which are part of the word אבא (Abba).*



# The Jerusalem School

*Based on an interview with David Bivin conducted by Yishai Eldar and originally published in Christian Life in Israel, Winter 1985/86.*

**Q:** What is the starting point of the work of the Jerusalem School for the Study of the Synoptic Gospels?

**A:** The Jerusalem School is trying to recover a lost document from the Second Temple period: the "Biography of Jesus" which we believe underlies the synoptic Gospels. Our research shows that this biography most probably was written in Hebrew.

Like so much Hebrew literature from that period, it has been preserved only in Greek translation. In this case, it has been embedded in the Greek texts of the synoptic Gospels.

**Q:** Do you mean that the Gospels originally were written in Hebrew?

**A:** Most Christians would suppose that all of the New Testament was written originally in Greek. But there is good reason to believe that behind the synoptic Gospels — Matthew, Mark and Luke — is a Hebrew original.

**Q:** How can you tell?

**A:** If one is sufficiently fluent in Greek and Hebrew, it is possible to employ a Hebrew "control." Translate the Greek of the Gospels back into Hebrew. If it translates easily — if the word order is Hebrew, if the idioms are Hebrew — then you may suspect that what you are dealing with was originally written or spoken in Hebrew.

But if you keep stumbling over words and idioms for which there are no Hebrew equivalents, then you suspect you are translating a Greek original.

**Q:** Can you give an example?

**A:** Jesus used the idioms "good eye" and "bad eye." Translators

have rendered these idioms in a wide variety of ways.

One modern English version — Weymouth — translates Matthew 6:22 as, "The eye is the lamp of the body. If, then, your eyesight is good, your whole body will be well lighted; but if your eyesight is bad, your whole body will be dark." But the idioms "good eye" and "bad eye" have nothing to do with eyesight. They are Hebrew idioms for generosity and stinginess. A person with a "good eye," עין טובה ('A·yin to·VA), is generous; a stingy person is said to have a "bad eye," עין רעה ('A·yin ra·'A) — which, it should be noted, has no connection with the concept of "the evil eye."

**Q:** What does the Jerusalem School hope to accomplish?

**A:** There are several things that I feel will be important for the Christian community. One result of our research will be a better understanding of the words of Jesus, because the key to understanding his words is to be found in ancient Jewish literature — Hebrew and Aramaic — rather than in ancient Greek literature.

Additionally, this research may cause Christians to take a closer look at their own identity, and encourage them to return to their Hebraic and Jewish roots. Personally, I think this may bring about a significant change in Christian thinking.

**Q:** The Jerusalem School includes a number of Jewish scholars. Over the years, some Christians have resented, or even feared, Jewish research into New Testament literature.

**A:** I think that sort of fear has largely been dispelled by what has been happening here in Israel dur-

ing the last thirty years. For example, my own understanding of Jesus has been deepened *because* I have studied with Jewish scholars, particularly those at the Hebrew University.

Of course, this collaboration of Jewish and Christian scholars here in Jerusalem is something unique in history. But without it, and without the intimate knowledge of Hebrew and rabbinic sources contemporary with the time of Jesus, it is impossible to fully understand the sayings of Jesus.

**Q:** Is this true for the layperson as well, that someone reading the Gospels wouldn't fully understand what he or she was reading?

**A:** Yes, I have laypeople in mind specifically. Let me give you a personal example.

As I was growing up, I kept stumbling over phrases in the Gospels that just were not "English." These obscurities were so frustrating that by the time I was twenty-four years old, I had almost stopped reading the Gospels.

I wasn't at a spiritual low, nor was I spending less time reading the Bible. I avidly read the epistles of Paul and the rest of the New Testament, but I had unconsciously almost stopped reading the words of Jesus themselves. Because of my unfamiliarity with the linguistic and cultural background to Jesus' sayings, I just couldn't seem to understand the meaning of many Gospel passages.

I don't think my case was unusual. I am convinced this has been happening to Christians for the last 1900 years. The language of much of the Gospels is so Hebraic, and therefore often so confusing in Greek or in translations from the Greek, that readers often throw up their hands in frustration.

Of course, when I was twenty-four I didn't understand that the Gospels are influenced by Hebrew. The Gospel texts we have today were written in Greek, but apparently in many cases the language is actually Hebrew in Greek disguise.